

Key Elements of the Occupational History for the General Physician

CHARLES E. BECKER, MD, *San Francisco*

Taking a medical history is an art that requires skill, experience and practice. There is now increasing recognition of the importance of workplace and environmental factors in causing or aggravating common medical conditions. Because of limited training in evaluating workplace and environmental hazards, general physicians may find it difficult to target a general medical history to detect essential occupational details.

Many diseases caused by the workplace or the environment masquerade as common medical conditions that may appear resistant to standard therapy. Orthopedic difficulties, skin diseases, asthma, neuropathies, cancer and diminished hearing are all common entities with frequent exacerbations or primary causation from occupational or environmental exposures. It is difficult and sometimes impossible to obtain a detailed occupational history because an individual worker may have limited knowledge of the potential toxicities on the job. With a high index of suspicion and ready access to appropriate lines of referral, one may be able to detect or prevent important diseases. The purpose of this brief article is to outline key elements that can be added to a standard history form. It is anticipated that these additions will be useful in refining one's art and skill in detecting occupational or environmental diseases. Table 1 provides a brief guide to the key points of an occupational/environmental history.

Additions to Standard History Questions

Present Illness

Under each individual problem listed in your problem-oriented record add the following four questions:

1. *Are the symptoms associated with work? Are these symptoms improved during vacations or weekends?*
2. *Are other workers similarly affected?*
3. *Are you currently exposed to any dust, fumes or chemicals?*
4. *Was a first report of work injury filed by a physi-*

cian? (This is an extremely valuable way of identifying the specifics of an occupational injury and also identifying those physicians who evaluated the patient immediately after the suspected injury.)

Work History

1. *List in chronological order all jobs. Describe in detail the work site (diagram may be helpful). Describe a typical work day.*
2. *Was protective equipment issued; do you have knowledge of safety programs given on the job?*
3. *Is ventilation in your workplace appropriate?*
4. *Was a preemployment examination done?*
5. *Is any specialized periodic testing or medical surveillance done on current or prior jobs?*
6. *Are you aware of industrial hygiene sampling of the workplace?*
7. *List the total number of days missed on each job. List specific reasons for absenteeism.*
8. *Has a worker compensation claim ever been filed in your behalf? If so, list the specifics.*
9. *Have there been special health and safety issues presented by your labor union?*
10. *In addition to your regular work, have you ever moonlighted? List additional jobs.*

Past History

Certain occupational exposures may be subtle and require a specific response:

Refer to: Becker CE: Key elements of the occupational history for the general physician, *In Occupational disease—New vistas for medicine*. West J Med 1982 Dec; 137:581-582.

Dr. Becker is Associate Professor of Medicine, University of California, San Francisco; and Chief, Division of Occupational Medicine and Toxicology and Associate Director, Northern California Occupational Health Center, San Francisco General Hospital Medical Center, San Francisco.

Reprint requests to: Charles E. Becker, MD, Northern California Occupational Health Center, San Francisco General Hospital Medical Center, Bldg. 30, 5th Floor, San Francisco, CA 94110.

OCCUPATIONAL HISTORY

TABLE 1.—Key Points of an Occupational/
Environmental History

<i>Present Illness</i> (for each element of problem list)
Symptoms related to work
Other employees similarly affected
Current exposure to dusts, fumes, chemicals, biologic hazards
Prior first report of work injury
<i>Work History</i>
Describe—all prior jobs
—typical work day
—change in work process
Worksite—ventilation, medical and industrial hygiene surveillance, employment exams, protective measures
Union health and safety
"Moonlighting"
Days missed work last year. Why?
Prior worker compensation claims
<i>Past History</i>
Exposure to noise, vibration, radiation, chemicals, asbestos
<i>Environmental History</i>
Present and prior home and work locations
Jobs of "significant others"
Hazardous wastes/spills exposure
Air pollution
Hobbies: painting, sculpture, welding, woodworking
Home insulation-heating
Home and work cleaning agents
Pesticide exposure
Do you wear seat belts?
Do you have firearms in home or work?
<i>Review of Systems</i>
Specific emphasis: shift changes
boredom
reproductive history

1. *Have you regularly been exposed to loud noises, excessive vibration or heat?*
2. *Have you ever been exposed to asbestos?*
3. *Have you ever been exposed to radioactive chemicals or excessive radiation?*
4. *Have you been exposed to chemicals?*
5. *During military service what were your duties? Did you have any exposure to potentially toxic agents?*

Environmental Health History

There is increasing recognition of subtle problems in the environment contributing to disease:

1. *Are there any new factories located in your neighborhood?*
2. *Have you been exposed to any hazardous waste sites or toxic spills?*
3. *List jobs of spouse or significant others.*
4. *Is there commonly air pollution in your environment?*

5. *List all hobbies and recreational activities. Specifically, do you work with painting, sculpting, welding or woodworking? If so, what is the location and ventilation?*
6. *Describe the insulation and heating in your current and past living areas.*
7. *What agents are used to clean your home and workplace?*
8. *Are insecticides used in your home or environment?*
9. *Do you maintain firearms in your home or workplace?*
10. *Do you wear seat belts?*

Review of Systems

It is especially important to recognize high-risk jobs such as fire fighting, mining or forestry. Special emphasis should be placed on detecting occupational skin and lung diseases, cancer, peripheral neuropathy and liver disorders. In addition, specific questions should be asked about two special areas: working hours and reproductive history.

1. *What are your working hours? Has your job schedule required major changes of shift work that have disturbed your sleep? Are you bored on the job?*
2. Special attention to reproductive history is essential. *Record the number of miscarriages, children, stillbirths, prior pregnancies and difficulties conceiving. Have you noted any change in libido or menses?*

What to Do With a Suspicious Occupational or Environmental History

1. Be sure to obtain copies of all prior records, especially first reports of work injury.
2. Establish local lines of referral to skilled physicians and industrial hygienists with experience in this area.
3. Identify key references:
 - A useful flow diagram for a systematic approach to history taking and diagnosis of occupational diseases is provided by Goldman and Peters: Goldman RH, Peters JM: The occupational environmental health history. JAMA 1981 Dec 18; 246:2831-2836
 - A small but useful guide to the symptoms and signs in occupational diseases is provided in a text costing \$9.95. Keep this at hand and refer to it frequently:
Daugaard J: Symptoms and Signs in Occupational Disease; A Practical Guide. Copenhagen, Munksgaard, distributed by Year Book Medical Publishers, Inc, 1978
 - This text lists in alphabetical order common chemicals and some key references:
Proctor N, Hughes J: Chemical Hazards of the Workplace. Philadelphia, JB Lippincott Co, 1978
 - For a useful, broad text, the following book is recommended:
Occupational Diseases: A Guide to Their Recognition, DHEW publication No. 77-181. US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1978